Evaluating the effect of fishery closures: lessons learnt from the Plaice Box

To reduce discarding of plaice Pleuronectes platessa in the North Sea flatfish fisheries, the major nursery areas were closed to large trawlers in 1995. The area closed was named the ‘Plaice Box’ (PB) and beam trawl effort fell by over 90%, while the exemption fleets of small flatfish beam trawlers, gill netters targeting sole (Solea solea) and shrimp (Crangon crangon) trawlers increased their effort. Contrary to the expectation, plaice landings and biomass declined. The initial support for the PB from the fisheries was lost, whereas other stakeholder groups claimed that any failure was due to the fact that fishing had never been completely prohibited in the area. To evaluate whether the PB has been an effective management measure, the changes in the ecosystem (plaice, demersal fish, benthos) and fisheries are analysed to test whether the observed changes are due to the PB or to changes in the environment unrelated to the PB. Juvenile growth rate of plaice decreased and juveniles moved to deeper waters outside the PB. Demersal fish biomass decreased, whereas the abundance of epibenthic predators (Asterias rubens and Cancer pagurus) increased in the PB. Endobenthos, in particular the main food items of plaice (polychaetes and small bivalves) remained stable or decreased both inside and outside the PB. Currently catches of both plaice and sole from within the PB are lower than in the late 1980s and the exemption fleet often prefers to fish outside the Plaice Box alongside much larger competitors. It is concluded that the observed changes are most likely related to changes in the North Sea ecosystem, which may be related to changes in eutrophication and temperature. It is less likely that they are related to the change in fishing. This case study highlights the importance setting testable objectives and an appropriate evaluation framework including both ecological and socio-economic indicators when implementing closed areas.

Key words: Marine Protected Area, MPA, spatial management, fisheries management, discards, climate change, trawling impact, North Sea, benthos, ecosystem change, stakeholder perception

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Operational evaluation tools for fisheries management options (EFIMAS) (38094)
Existing models in fisheries management advice (FMA) only consider effects of overall fishing on single fish stocks, while not taking broader ecosystem, social and economic impacts of management decisions into account. Mixed fisheries aspects where several fishing fleets fish on several stocks in the same fishery, spatial planning, and long-term management strategy evaluation are also not considered adequately.

In response to this situation, managers launched EFIMAS aiming to develop alternative management evaluation tools and management strategies that have broader, multi-disciplinary and long-term perspectives. These include social and
economic impacts and ecosystem impacts (e.g. by-catch and discards), besides biological consequences on single stocks.

This is a new way of thinking international fisheries research and FMA, by developing conceptual and comprehensive multi-fleet and multi-stock bio-economic simulation tools and management evaluation frameworks (MEF), being spatial and seasonal explicit. A successful implementation of ecosystem, social and economic dynamics and factors on a spatial scale in the advisory process is a major leap towards more holistic and sustainable management within EU waters and fisheries. MEFs enable higher degree of participatory management evaluation by involving various stakeholders in FMA.

EFIMAS, and sister projects, develop and integrates a set of new and existing software tools and simulation models (especially FLR – Fisheries Library in R), generating a more robust Management Strategy Evaluation (MSE) framework, that allows testing plausible hypotheses about dynamics of fish stocks, fisheries and fleets.

The MEF contributes to a conceptual change and paradigm shift in generating advice and management with entire fleets and fisheries as the central units. Here the basic management instrument is the input, i.e. the capacity of fishing fleets, the vessel efficiency, and the effort (activity). This differs from the traditional output based ICES approach, providing advice on single fish stock catch limit from rather uncertain terminal year stock assessments and under strong assumptions on future total stock fishing mortality (F) without much consideration on factors, creating and controlling F and partial Fs by fleet.

The developed frameworks allow simulating and evaluating, respectively, the biological, social and economical consequences of a range of proposed management options and objectives within different management regimes. They can evaluate fleet and mixed fisheries interactions and fisheries behavior, uncertainties in stock and fisheries dynamics, data collection, assessment, modelling, as well as the advisory management and implementation processes. Being capable of evaluating the relative performance of multiple alternative options the MEFs possess strong capacity in performing sensitivity and risk analyses of consequences.

Managing fisheries in a virtual environment provides more reliable scientific advice to stakeholders: In the same way that a pilot might fly in a simulator before flying for real, the simulation tools evaluates the robustness of alternative strategies and virtual regimes to give more holistic FMA in broader context before implementation. This provides managers and stakeholders a better idea of the consequence of a given strategy or intervention before opting for a particular management approach.

The overall evaluation comprises process evaluation (PE) and technical evaluation (TE). PE focuses on participatory management. Here participatory and iterative scenario-based MEF modelling is used to obtain input and cyclic feedback from multiple stakeholders for different options, and to test the general utility of the operational MEF.

Participants: 30 European universities and national fisheries research institutes with biological and economic expertise as listed under www.efimas.org.

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